

Ringers

By Laurie Burns; Illustrations by Doug Shuler

The kid was just too damned lucky. Ignoring the bustle of the busy Stassia squad room around him, Sergeant Zeck Tambell watched the holo again with an odd mix of personal envy and professional disgust. Amid the clutter on his desk, a miniature Reye Sedeya was gloating over his credstick while a security droid stood nearby, stolidly guarding the skinny kid and his winnings.

Big winnings, too. The booth only accepted 1,000-credit minimum bets.

Tambell's mouth twisted and he thumbed off the holopad, shoving it further back in the mess. Grimacing at the taste, he drained the last tepid drops of caffia from his cup, crumpled it into a compact little ball, leaned back in his chair and carefully took aim.

It landed in the water garden with a satisfying splash, and across the room, Corporal Valon Rizz twitched as drops spattered across the list of Imperial stop-and-detains he was scanning.

"Blast it, Tambell, knock it off!" he growled, shooting a glare across the four desks that separated them. "You're killing my plants!"

Tambell grinned. "I'm perfecting my aim," he corrected the younger investigator. "You never know when I'll have to shoot a Rebel off your back."

"I'll take my chances," Rizz said, fishing the soggy ball out of the bowl on his desk. He frowned when he saw Tambell's latest toss had bruised one of the delicate white lilies floating in the water. "Look at that," he accused. "They're looking worse every day."

"Oh, relax. They're fine." Tambell swung booted feet up onto his desk, ignoring the pile of data cards that slithered off the edge and clattered to the floor below. He crossed his arms, looking thoughtful. "Say, Rizz, what do you know about ringers?"

Rizz snorted. "I'd stick with squad room sports, if I were you."

"I just caught this case," Tambell said, as if he hadn't heard. "Kid betting on ringer tournaments whose luck's just too good to be true. Six bets, six wins -- he's gotta be rigging it somehow."

"Bribing some of the tossers to lose, maybe?" Rizz suggested.

"That's what I thought," Tambell agreed. "But the credits look clean, according to Franni." The Finance Retrieval and Net Investigations droid was a wonder at piecing together a money trail. "The kid's winnings match his bank deposits, and Franni can't find more than a couple hundred missing credits out of the whole pile. It would take a lot more than that to convince me to throw a tournament."

"So maybe they're getting something out of it besides money," Rizz said. Tambell looked skeptical, and the younger man shrugged. "Okay, so maybe he's got something rigged. Some kind of repulsor field or something, so they can't get the ring in. Or maybe he really is lucky."

"Nobody's *that* lucky," Tambell said. "Besides, the lieutenant says this one comes from higher up -- someone on our glorious leader's staff wants this kid checked out."

Rizz frowned warningly at the reference to Stassia's Imperial Governor Tren Pergallis, under whose auspices their Special Investigations squad looked into local matters of interest to the Empire. Tambell ignored the look. "It's not our usual kind of case, but if someone up there wants him, then we gotta get him. These ringer tournaments are like watching duracrete set, but--"

The squad room's comm scanner cut him off mid-sentence, blaring out the piercing tones used to summon rescue-and-repair units, followed by the dispatcher's impassive voice. "Assist units at the swoop track with an accident," it said. "Swoop into a pit; confirmed fatalities. Please acknowledge."



Tambell met Rizz's eyes, and they both grimaced. Swoop racing was a popular sport, but its accidents were notoriously messy. "That reminds me, you working the Sweepstakes this year?" Rizz asked. Swoop jocks had been pouring in from all over the sector to compete in the annual race day after tomorrow, and local enforcement paid triple-time to Imperial officers who helped with crowd control.

"No," Tambell said shortly. Even the lure of triple pay wasn't enough to make him forget the sight of last year's grisly wreck.

Rizz looked at him curiously, but let it pass. "So, check out the ringers' equipment next," he advised. "See if this kid's rigged up some kind of device we haven't heard of."

"You're the tech-junkie. Come with me and see for yourself," Tambell invited. "I'll even buy you lunch."

Rizz shot him a look. "Gee, thanks," he said dryly. "The last lunch you sprung for happened to have contraband spice in it. Having my stomach purged so the inspector could get a sample was *not* my idea of a good time."

"It got us the evidence we needed, didn't it?" he reminded the younger man. "C'mon. It'll be fun."

"I thought you said watching ringers is about as fun as putting on your socks," Rizz grumbled, nevertheless switching off his datapad and standing up.

Tambell grinned. "Even lower," he promised.

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Besides the ringers tournament going on in Pavilion C, there was an event Tambell vaguely recognized from the holovid going on down on the stadium's main field.

He watched as something resembling a humpbacked drometard trampled across the synthturf with the rest of the beasts in pursuit, but the peak of the action was blocked from view when the spectators in front of them leapt to their feet, screaming encouragement. Tambell kept walking, and a quarter of the way around the stadium, tapped Rizz's shoulder to stop him in front of a refreshment booth.

"What's this?" Rizz asked suspiciously, eyeing the greasy droids behind the counter with trepidation.

"Lunch," Tambell said. "And hurry it up. I want to get there before the tournament starts."

He hid a grin as Rizz gingerly ordered, casting a glance around while the order was processed. For this time of day, a decent-sized crowd milled about the betting booths and refreshment stands. Mostly Stassians, but Tambell saw a fetching Twi'lek female studying the beast game on the holo monitors, and a gaggle of Bimms squabbling as they placed a bet at one of the far booths.

And behind them stood Sedeya, credstick clutched at the ready: Tambell stiffened, eyes flicking to the booth's 5,000-credit minimum bet requirement. Not only was the skinny kid somehow flammng them, he was making a blasted fortune at it, too.

He nudged Rizz, nodded towards Sedeya, and they casually headed his way, stopping a few booths away. Tambell pretended to study the tournament program he'd bought downstairs while Rizz crunched his chipitas and covertly eyed the attractive Twi'lek. After Sedeya had placed his bet and hurried away, Tambell stepped up to the booth.

But not to place a wager.

Keying his security ID into the gambling machine, he tapped out a special access code. The machine hummed to itself for a few moments, then spit a datastub out of the slot into his waiting hand. The plastic stub contained information on the last dozen wagers placed at this booth, and it only took a moment to plug it into his datapad and discover that Sedeya had just bet 10,000 credits on Tosser Five to win today's tournament.



He looked up, gaze running over the various tote boards until he found the right one. With Tosser Five posting 12 to one odds, the kid looked poised to collect his biggest payoff yet.

Tambell gritted his teeth. "Let's get up there," he growled, showing Rizz the amount before pocketing the datapad and heading briskly toward Pavilion C. They were 15 meters from the entrance when he recognized the men standing alertly near the door.

Watchdogs. Hired muscle from the kennel of notorious Stassian crime madame Aalia Duu-lang.

The back of Tambell's neck tightened. Where Aalia went, larceny wasn't far behind. And, as he'd found to his personal and professional chagrin, the lady and her illicit doings were damn tricky to pin down. The aqua-eyed witch had brains, and she used them. Usually to get someone else to do her dirty work so her dainty hands stayed clean.

Beside him, Rizz slowed in slight hesitation.

"Yeah, I see 'em," Tambell said. They got to the door, and he stared at the first man, then the second; a deliberate gaze that both gamely pretended not to see. They recognized him, too, and attracting an Imperial investigator's attention wasn't in their job description.

He let Rizz precede him into the pavilion; a large room well-lit by the sun shining through the transparisteel skylights overhead. A stairway led down past several rows of seats to the tournament range, where multi-shaped rings hung suspended from the ceiling. Each odd shaped ring was worth a certain number of points, and the tosser with the most points at the end of four rounds won.

"How do they start 'em swinging?" Rizz asked, studying the metal tangle.

"Let's go see," Tambell said, and headed down the steps.

Up close, the rings looked deceptively innocuous. He'd been amazed the first time he'd seen a holo of it: the rings swinging back and forth in uneven arcs or gliding around in a spiraling orbit, while the tossers toed the competition line and carefully gauged the best moment, and with how much force, to toss their little metallic disks to get them through some portion of the hoops. Though a pretty fair aim himself, Tambell was grateful his own squad room targets held still.

Rizz eyed the rings speculatively. "There's a couple of ways this could work," he said. "He could polarize the rings and the disks, or equip one or the other with some kind of repulsor field. Then, no matter how well they aimed, they wouldn't be able to make ringers."

"Except that all the tossers use the same equipment," Tambell pointed out. "A pre-set device like that would keep the winner from making ringers just as much as it would prevent the losers."

"Hmmm," Rizz said. "What if it were something he could control? With a remote, or something?" He half-turned to study the tiers of seats. "He could sit close by, and..." His voice trailed off.

Tambell turned to see what had caught his attention. The headache that had threatened earlier when he saw Aalia Duu-lang's hired watchdogs announced its arrival with a piercing stab.

There was the lady herself, in a box seat near the edge of the range. Lush blond hair shimmered in the sunlight, and her sea-green eyes shone as she smiled warmly at the teen sitting beside her. Tambell wasn't fooled by her inviting manner, though he thought the bemused-looking Sedeya might be. Aalia Duu-lang hadn't clawed her way up Stassia's crime hierarchy on her womanly charms alone. The lady had a shrewd streak a kilometer wide, and greed was her middle name.

He sighed, absently rubbing his forehead in a vain attempt to stave off the headache. If Sedeya and Aalia were in this together, his work was definitely cut out. Aalia had a way of covering her tracks and protecting her -- er, *assets*.

As if feeling their eyes upon her, she glanced up, gaze narrowing just a bit as she identified him and Rizz before negligently returning her attention to the kid at her side. "What now?" Rizz asked.

"What else?" Tambell shrugged. "We watch 'em. See what happens."

They found seats close to Aalia's box, where Tambell had a good view of Sedeya's hands as well as his face. Gazing at Aalia with an expression of shy admiration mixed with apprehension, the kid seemed completely unaware he was being watched.

The tournament began, and Tambell's mouth quirked as Sedeya leaned forward to concentrate on the action, the abrupt move leaving Aalia chatting to empty air after the first toss. But besides that, there wasn't much to see. Elbows resting on his bony knees and empty hands clasped before him in plain sight, all the kid did was stare at the tossers with unblinking intensity.

After the first few tosses, Rizz stepped down to the edge of the range. Studying the tossers, their disks, and the rings for any tell-tale signs of trickery, he sent a look over his shoulder at Tambell, who gave him the same look right back. The tossers weren't scoring much, but he knew from the holos that wasn't unusual.

Then Sedeya's pick toed the line. Lightly fingering her disk, she swung her arm a few times as if to synchronize her movements with the swinging rings, then let it fly. Applause greeted her effort as she tossed a ringer -- and through the tricky Ace ring yet, putting her into the lead.

Through it all, Sedeya did... nothing. Not a twitch of the hand, barely a blink of the eye. As Tosser Five's name flashed to the top of the scoreboard, Aalia slanted a curious glance at her silent seatmate. Tambell wondered if she had placed a wager on the tournament, too.



The next seven tossers had varied success. One more managed an Ace, creating a tie going into the second round, and during the short break that followed, Tambell joined Rizz at the edge of the range. He watched as the kid slowly straightened up and blinked as if he'd been asleep, and Aalia leaned close to whisper in his ear.

"I don't know," Rizz said in answer to Tambell's unspoken question. "Hard to say without checking either him or the equipment out. But I didn't see anything obvious."

They glanced over at Aalia's box to find Sedeya looking back with a startled expression. Still pressing her shoulder to his, Aalia's eyes were amused, but she looked taken aback when the kid suddenly stood up. She said something in a low voice and he hesitated, then sidled towards the steps anyway. Her eyes chilled at his retreating back, and the two watchdogs sitting behind rose to their feet, clearly intent on following.

Whether to protect the kid, or get rid of evidence, the investigators didn't know. They looked at each other. "I guess we'd better take him in," Tambell said. "About time I had a chat with him, anyway."

At the door, they spotted him making tracks towards the turbolift cluster that serviced Pavilion C. Aalia's associates had lengthened stride to catch up, and he and Rizz did the same. Sedeya was waiting for a lift with the associates loitering casually nearby when they arrived. The kid glanced at them nervously, then looked away, chewing at his lower lip.

One of the turbolift's doors opened, and Sedeya slunk aboard. The watchdogs made to follow, but Tambell stepped in front of them, casually pulling his vest away to display the Imperial badge and blaster attached to his belt. They hesitated, looked over his shoulder at Rizz and Sedeya standing in the lift, then reluctantly stepped back.

He nodded approvingly, watching their wary faces until the door slid shut, then turned to survey an unhappy-looking Sedeya. As the lift sank downwards, the kid clearly wished he were somewhere -- anywhere -- else.

"Sergeant Tambell, Special Investigator for the Imperial Governor," he identified himself, watching the other's face turn white. "You've had quite a winning streak at the ringers tournaments -- haven't you, Citizen Sedeya?"

Sedeya flinched at the sound of his name, swallowed, and summoned the nerve to briefly look him in the eye. "I've been lucky," he managed.

Tambell nodded, pleased. If the kid was this intimidated now, perhaps with a little encouragement he'd spill it all at the station. "Well," he said, "I regret to inform you that your luck has just run dry."

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The first thing Tambell found out was that Sedeya was clean. Neither the scan nor the physical search turned up any kind of device like that Rizz envisioned being used to tilt the results of the tournament.

The second thing he discovered was that the kid was incredibly inept when it came to proper criminal behavior.

He was polite and well-mannered, albeit a bit skittish. He didn't fuss about having a Defender present, called Tambell "sir," and actually thanked him when offered a seat in Interrogation Room One.

Used to dealing with surly, uncooperative suspects, Tambell sat and simply stared at him. Sedeya gazed back apprehensively, looking younger than his 19 years, and far more vulnerable than any self-respecting flammer would ever let himself be seen.

"Um, am I under arrest, sir?" he asked tentatively. "You didn't say, earlier."

"If it's up to me, you will be," Tambell said, deliberately harsh as Sedeya's thin face paled, and he wilted further into his seat. "But no, you're not under arrest. You're being detained. For the moment," he added.

He let the kid think about that as Rizz fetched three cups of caffia, then pulled a chair over and sat down so they were both facing him across the table. The seating arrangement was more calculated than chance -- it was his turn to play nasty to Rizz's niece. He waited until Sedeya was shifting uneasily in his seat before starting in. "You're aware that fraud is a crime against the Empire, punishable by deportation to a prison world, aren't you?"

Sedeya nodded hesitantly.

"Well then, explain to me how you were smart enough to figure out a way to pull it off, but too stupid to get away with it?" He watched as the kid's expression ran through a series of emotions: shock, and surprise, before finally settling on what appeared to be confusion.

"I -- I don't understand," he said, uncertainly looking from Tambell's accusing eyes to Rizz's less judgmental ones. "What are you talking about?"

It was a good show, but Tambell wasn't buying the wide-eyed bit. "Six bets? Six wins?" He cocked his head skeptically. "Isn't that a bit too coincidental?"

The kid dropped his gaze. "I've been lucky," he mumbled to the tabletop.

Tambell snorted. "Some might say there's more to it than that."

"It's true," he said earnestly. "I've always been lucky. That doesn't mean I've done anything wrong. I haven't."

"Listen," Tambell said. "Nobody's *that* lucky. Not without a little help."

"There's no law against winning. I haven't done anything wrong." A trace of resentment crept into Sedeya's tone.

Tambell heard it. Sardonicly, he offered, "Take a word of advice, kid. Most flammers go ahead and lose a few, just to throw us off track."

Sedeya frowned, but didn't say anything. Tambell waited, hoping for more of a reaction. Getting suspects riled often paid rewards when they tripped up in the rush to defend themselves. "Okay, so tell me this," he said, changing tacks when it became clear Sedeya wasn't going to rise to the bait. "What's your relationship with Aalia Duu-lang?"

The kid looked startled -- and vaguely alarmed. "I don't have one. I just met her today!"

"How?"

"Before the tournament. This guy I met last week introduced me to her."

"You know who she is, don't you?" Tambell pressed. Sedeya hesitated, clearly uncomfortable.

"Not really."

"Now, there you go again," Tambell admonished. "Six wins, no losses, and you've been seen with one of the most notorious crime madames on Stassia. What does that look like to you?"

Sedeya shrugged.

"So if you don't know her, what did Aalia want with *you*?"

The kid smiled humorlessly. "The same as you," he said. "She wanted to know why my luck was so good. How I pick winners. That sort of thing."

"Did you tell her?"

"Sure," he said. "It's no secret. She offered me a job."

Tambell raised an eyebrow, and leaned forward to give the kid his best I'm-gonna-get-you glare. "You don't want to get involved with her, if you're not already," he pointedly advised. "We'll take her down one of these days, and we'll take you right down with her."

Sedeya looked away without responding, and after a moment, Rizz took over the questioning. "So, how *do* you pick'em?" he asked amiably.

The kid looked at him, confused. "Huh?"

"Which tosser's going to win? How do you pick them?"

"Oh." Sedeya thought about it for a moment. "Well, I watch them warm up before the tournament. See how they're tossing, and stuff. Usually there's just something I like about them."

Rizz asked another question, and listening to his gentle voice amid careful verbal probes, Tambell was reminded of the time they'd had Aalia Duu-lang in that chair. That time, he'd played the nice guy while Rizz nipped at her heels.

Perhaps that was why Sedeya's innocent act rankled him so. He felt a dull burning at the memory. He'd been nice all right -- way too nice.

Four years ago, when Aalia was still an associate slithering around doing her crime lord's bidding, they'd picked her up in connection with a credit counterfeiting scheme. He'd looked into those incredible eyes and dove into his role with relish, never noticing the serpent that swam just under her seemingly sweet surface. They hadn't been able to make the charges stick, and she'd gone on to forge her own little corner on Stassia's crime market. And they hadn't been able to touch her since.

But what really gnawed at him was the secret knowledge that he'd halfway believed her protestations of innocence. *She'd played him* -- for a fool.

That wasn't going to happen this time.

He focused back in on Rizz and Sedeya. The kid was telling Rizz how he'd always been good at picking winners. Color had returned to his thin face, and his voice was animated. "It got to be that they started betting on who would come in second, cause if I said one was going to win, it *won*," he said.

"Is that what it's like with the ringers?" Rizz asked.

Sedeya nodded. "Sort of. I just picture the winner making ringers, and the losers missing. And it happens. Luck." He shrugged. Tambell rolled his eyes.

"Oh yeah. Right, kid," he cut in derisively. "You call it luck, I call it a flam. You don't really expect us to believe that load of munk?"

Sedeya just looked at him. "It's true," he said stubbornly. Tambell shook his head in disgust, sat back in his chair and took a sip of caffia, listening as Rizz led Sedeya on a roundabout query of his knowledge of electronics. The more ignorant the kid sounded, the more disgusted he got.

Then it occurred to him: maybe Sedeya really *did* think it was luck. Maybe he was as wet behind the ears as he sounded, and Aalia's associates were handling the mechanics of the fraud, rigging the equipment or bribing the tossers, while he was just the front they used to divert attention from themselves. Maybe the kid didn't know he was already working for Aalia.

Tambell sat considering all the angles that accompanied the theory. It was another avenue to explore, anyway. One that might end up giving them the goods on that aqua-eyed witch. He smiled.

Finishing off the caffia, he absently crumpled the cup and glanced around for a place to get rid of it. Not three meters away, a waste bin with a wide, inviting rim rested against the wall. An easy shot.

He missed.

Tambell stared as the crumpled ball skittered to a halt on the floor beyond. He couldn't believe it. The bin was easily three times as large as Rizz's water garden, and closer to boot. How could he miss?

Feeling eyes upon him, he glanced across the table. Sedeya was looking at him stubbornly, while Rizz looked amused. "Looks like your winning streak's come to an end," he said.

That dry observation bothered Tambell the rest of the interview.

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The next morning, he checked the sports scores and discovered that Sedeya's winning streak had come to an end, as well.

After her promising start, Tosser Five failed to maintain her lead and ended up finishing fourth. The kid was out the 10,000 credits he -- or, more likely, Aalia -- had wagered. Tambell wondered if she was annoyed.

He also wondered if she'd engineered the loss simply to throw them off the scent. He wouldn't put it past her, and the Hutts knew she could afford it.

He'd brought Rizz one of those spindly little lilies he liked so much to make up for the one he'd squashed yesterday, and after Rizz added it to the water garden and pointedly covered the bowl with a plasticsheet, they went over their impressions of the interview again.

"The kid's dumber than a space slug about electronics," Rizz said. "He wouldn't have a clue how to rig up something to tilt the tournament. You're right; we should concentrate on his connection to Aalia."

"Franni's already on it," Tambell said. "Meanwhile, let's take a look at what she's been up to lately. This isn't her usual style, but she's probably looking for ways to expand business."

"Yeah, and let's head back out to the stadium, too," Rizz said. "Take another look at the equipment. She's either got to be bribing the tossers, or rigging the rings. I want a closer look at--"

The comm scanner in the corner cut him off, and they listened as another accident was reported at the swoop track. Tambell grimaced. One more hotshot swoop jock who wouldn't be starting in tomorrow's big race. *Yuck*.

He returned his attention to Rizz. "I want to put a surveil-cam on Sedeya, too," he said. "The kid looks too green to notice he's being followed, and if he meets with Aalia, I want to know about it."

"Good idea," Rizz agreed. They discussed the plan of attack a while longer, then got to work. Then the lieutenant came in and gave Tambell grief about the case update he'd filed, and he had to waste time pawing around under his desk for the data cards that always seemed to pile up down there, and then waste more time looking up details on the kid that some bit-pusher upstairs just *had* to have. Then Franni gave them a list of Aalia's recent financial transactions, and he and Rizz were following up on that when the surveil-cam reported that Sedeya had been seen with the crime madame that afternoon.

The end result was that by the end of the day, they still hadn't made it out to the stadium to take a closer look at the ringers' equipment.

But they had discovered that Aalia did indeed appear to be moving into the field of wager fraud, and that the main topic of conversation during her meeting with Sedeya had been who the kid thought would win tomorrow's swoop sweepstakes.

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"I'll have you know I'm giving up triple-time pay for this," Rizz grumbled the next day as he and Tambell inspected the rings in Pavilion C. All 12 ringer tossers, clearly unsettled by the Imperial investigators' summons, clustered together at the edge of the range, watching uneasily as the pair looked for evidence of ring tampering.

"Isn't bringing down Aalia Duu-lang worth it?" Tambell countered.

"Yeah, if we can do it," Rizz said sourly. "We've been over these twice already. There's nothing here. I say we move on to Plan B." Plan B was questioning the tossers. If they were going to nail Aalia, they needed to know whether to focus their attention on the swoop jocks, or their equipment, after she and Sedeya cleaned up at today's big race.

"There's no way any of us would cheat," Tosser Five declared, folding her arms and looking across the pavilion to where Rizz was interviewing Tosser Three. "It's *tough* to make a ringer. We practice for it every day. You think after all that work we'd go out and deliberately try to *miss*?"

"You might if there were enough credits in it for you," Tambell said mildly.

She glared at him. "No, Sergeant. I wouldn't," she said firmly.

"Okay, so maybe you wouldn't," he agreed. "Would anybody else?"

"No!" she repeated with a scowl.

He eyed her indignant expression, decided she was probably telling the truth. He sighed. "Okay, so help me out a bit here," he said. "If the tossers aren't taking bribes, and the equipment isn't rigged, is there any other way someone could cheat?"

"No," she said again, then amended, "Well, not really. It's not like there's any Jedi around anymore."

Tambell looked at her sharply. "What?"

"Jedi," she repeated, starting to look a little nervous. "I've heard stories they could move things with their minds. Something called the Force. That would be handy playing ringers."

"The Force is nothing more than a legend," Tambell told her repressively. "And anyway, the Jedi are long gone. Extinct."

"Well, sure, like I said," she hurried to agree. "Good thing, too. I bet we'd all like to just picture the competition missing a toss, and have it happen. But that's impossible."

She went on, but Tambell was no longer listening. His mind replayed her words, hearing Sedeya's voice instead. What was it the kid had said? *I just picture the winners making ringers, and the losers missing. And it happens?*

He remembered his own missed toss the night of the interview, and Sedeya staring at him from across the table. He and Rizz hadn't been able to uncover evidence of bribes or rigged equipment, either. Was it possible the kid could do something that he wasn't consciously aware of?

Something like causing a competitor's performance to be off? Just enough to ensure a loss?

He suddenly remembered what day it was, and a chill ran down his back.

If such an unlikely thing were true, how might such a mysterious Force manifest itself in making sure that the right jock won a highspeed, close-quarters race, in which the slightest "off" performance could well prove fatal?

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The huge domed arena that housed Stassia's swoop track was finally in sight. Glaring out at the sea of pedestrians clogging the street ahead of them, Tambell tried to strangle back his impatience and ended up thumping on the robo-hack's roof instead.

"There's no need to be abusive, sir," the droid brain running the robo-hack admonished him in affronted tones.

"Calm down, we're moving," Rizz added.

"Not fast enough," Tambell growled. Since Sedeya had lost his bet the other day when they'd pulled him away from the ringers tournament, he figured the kid had to be present for this Jedi thing to work. He had to get him away from the swoop track before the kid could start "picturing" losers.

Tambell's mouth tightened. He'd worry about how to keep this ridiculous Force stuff out of the report later. If the lieutenant thought he'd actually bought into any of that junk that passed for Jedi legend, his next assignment would be in the spice mines of Kessel.

Fighting back frustration, he dug out his comlink instead. "Hey Franni," he said when the droid answered. "Hook into the betting booths at the swoop track, will you? I want to know if Reye Sedeya or Aalia Duu-lang have placed any bets. How much, and on who. I want it as soon as possible," he added.

They'd edged a few blocks closer to the arena by the time Franni called back and reported that Sedeya had bet 10 credits on Bike Six to win.

Tambell frowned at the news. *Only 10 credits?*

But his scowl turned to a smile when he learned Aalia had more than made up for it.

She'd gone for the exacta, wagering 50,000 credits on Six to win; and Nine to place. Exactas were dicier to predict, but paid bigger rewards, and he wondered whether Sedeya could not only make Six win, but ensure that Nine came in second. For Aalia to collect, the jocks had to finish in that order.

And then it occurred to him -- maybe, just maybe, she'd hedged her bets.

All the swoop jocks wanted to win the big prize, of course, but the purses for third, fourth, fifth, and sixth places weren't cheap change either. Especially if they came with a little bonus for not finishing on top.

He got Franni checking on the right accounts, then took another look at the foot traffic flowing past outside. The entire city seemed out for a stroll. Tossing some change into the robo-hack's credit tray, he opened the door and fought his way out to the crowded curb with Rizz trailing in his wake. The way they'd been crawling along, they'd get there faster on foot.

Joining the swarm heading for the arena entrance, they flashed their badges at the ticket droid and were waved inside. They squeezed onto the first available lift plate carrying spectators up to the grandstand and, once on top, Rizz dug out a locator and flipped it on, keying in a code. A green dot winked in the grid's center, and after the device sent out its invisible feelers, a blinking red dot appeared at the edge of the grid.

Tambell looked at it, then glanced down at the several thousand packed seats surrounding the oval track. "Figures," he said sourly. The surveil-cam tracking Sedeya wasn't that far away -- but it was straight across the track, indicating that the kid and Aalia were seated somewhere on the far side. He and Rizz would have to go all the way around.

And they didn't have time.

The traditional call to the post pealed out of the grandstand's comm speakers and was promptly drowned out by the crowd's anticipatory roar. Tambell caught a glimpse of the jocks cruising out of the pits and onto the track, their swoops' lethal-looking steering vanes glittering like bayonets under the dome's bright lights. They looked well-protected in their colorful body armor and helmets, but he knew just how useless the stuff really was in a crash.

Tiers of seats marched down to where a six-meter high duracrete wall marked the drop-off to the track below. If a jock lost control of his swoop, the wall theoretically stopped him from plunging into the grandstand. In reality, since swoops crash up as well as down, the wall wasn't much comfort to the spectators in the lower tiers.

Not that it mattered. The seats were the most expensive, and they always sold out.

The jocks finished their post parade and zipped down the track, engines whining as they accelerated over the warm-up obstacle, a metal gate that could easily accommodate most of the field as they raced abreast. Later, several laps into the race, the obstacles would get narrower, the jocks vying to get over, under, or through in the dwindling space. Tambell had always thought that for supposedly intelligent beings, swoop jocks had precious little common sense. Or else a death wish.

He and Rizz started down the steps. It was a long way to the track below, and by the time they were halfway down the swoops had lined up. The buzz of the crowd disappeared under a deafening chorus of mechanical screams as the jocks revved their thrusters, but even at full throttle, the swoops were stymied by the repulsor web holding them at the post.

The countdown blinked down on the displays covering the duracrete wall, and the crowd picked up the chant, stamping their feet with each number. At zero, the displays went green, the swoops plunged forward, the spectators went wild, and Tambell groaned.

"We'll never get there in time," he shouted over his shoulder to Rizz, who nodded agreement. They reached the bottom tier just as the field whined past on its ninth lap, the swoops bobbing like boats on a storm-tossed sea as they dipped to avoid one of the obstacles hovering over the track.

Rizz held up the locator. "They're practically straight across," he shouted, pointing out over the infield where mechanics and maintenance droids clogged the pits. Tambell looked around for some way to get to the other side before reluctantly concluding the long drop below was it.

"So, let's go across," he shouted back.

Rizz stared at him -- *Are you nuts?* -- but didn't protest as Tambell edged between the wall and the first tier of seats. A laser-link security fence glowed in front of them: criss-crossed thin red lines which discouraged over-enthusiastic onlookers from jumping onto the track. They stepped on toes and otherwise annoyed the spectators before Tambell finally found what he was looking for. He slid his security ID into a slot, and a 10-meter section of the laser-link fence winked out.

He looked at the drop below and sighed, but swung a leg over the rim of the duracrete wall anyway. Boot bumping against the tote board display, now flashing with the numbers of the leading swoops, he swung his other leg over, took a deep breath, and let go.

About a third of the way down, he realized the six-meter drop was way beyond his capacity to comfortably land, and scrambled madly at the tote board as it flashed past. Catching an edge helped slow his descent, but gave his arms an awful yank, and his whole body felt the impact when his feet finally hit the ground.

Gritting his teeth, he tilted his head to look up at Rizz. The younger man didn't look enthusiastic, but tucked the locator away, carefully poised himself on top of the rim, and then surprised Tambell by making a sudden lunge for the nearest obstacle, hovering over the track a little less than two meters from the wall. It dipped under his weight as he caught the closest edge, and before its repulsors could compensate, Rizz had dropped lightly to the ground.

"You okay?" he asked in concern, seeing Tambell's pinched face. Nodding shortly, Tambell tried to take a step, and found his feet weren't done being numb yet. The whine of the swoops headed their way once more and, flattening himself against the wall, he tried not to wince as they roared by, steering vanes making little slicing noises in the air.

Once they were past, he and Rizz headed for the infield, stepping over hydraulic lines and containers of lubricant and avoiding greasy mechanics as they weaved through the pits. They were at the far side, staring across the track and wondering how they were going to get back up that blasted wall when a different sort of whine drew Tambell's attention to the side.

Their little jaunt hadn't gone unnoticed by track security. A small floater plat stopped a few meters away, and a stern-looking officer ordered them to come with her. They glanced at each other, shrugged, and agreeably stepped up. The woman's expression changed when Tambell showed her his badge. "Oh," she said. "How can I help you, Sergeant?"

She set them down near the top of the grandstand, and they had just stepped off the plat when a howl rose from the crowd, punctuated by scattered shrieks and screams. The officer squinted at the far side of the track, then yanked out her macrobinoculars and studied the spill. "It's okay," she reported after a moment. "No spectators hurt, anyway. Thankfully. We mopped up for weeks afterwards, last year."

Tambell grimaced. "C'mon," he said to Rizz. "Let's get that kid." Aalia and her entourage weren't hard to find, not with the locator showing Sedeya practically dead ahead. Not that he needed it anyway; Aalia's bright blonde hair reflected the overhead lights like a mirror, and her eyes were unfathomable as she stared over her shoulder at them from where she held court in a comfortable box seat on one of the middle tiers. Sedeya, his skinny body radiating unease, sat beside her.

Two of the watchdogs took up positions on either side of the box as Tambell stepped up to its entrance, but he wasn't surprised when Aalia treated him and Rizz to the full force of her charm. "Corporal Tambell," she greeted him warmly. "I didn't know you were a swoop enthusiast."

"It's *Sergeant* now, and I'm not," Tambell said flatly. He nodded towards Sedeya. "We're here for your friend." The kid stared at him, looking stricken, but at least his attention was off the race going on below.

Aalia's perfect smile never wavered. "Do you have a detention order?"

"Will I need one?" he countered, looking into those incredible eyes and recognizing the cold contempt that lurked in their depths. At his belt, his comlink beeped and he pulled it out and handed it to Rizz without breaking the gaze. Rizz stepped to the side and handled the call.

"Yes, I think you will," Aalia said. "After that unpleasantness at the tournament the other day, Reye's had quite enough of cooperating with you. Haven't you, Reye?"

The kid squirmed in his chair and started to say something, but she put a warning hand on his arm. He gulped and shut up. "Come back when you have a detention order, *Sergeant*," she advised, still smiling pleasantly. "Otherwise, please move aside. You're blocking our view."

Tambell felt anger start to burn. Four years ago, at least she'd had the proper respect for Imperial authority. Now she was downright arrogant. Before he could respond, Sedeya slid out from under Aalia's manicured hand and stood up. "That's all right, sir," he mumbled, not looking at the crime madame. "I'll come with you."

Aalia's smile remained in place, but her eyes were abruptly icy. "Are you sure that's what you want to do?" she asked. "You don't have to go with him, Reye. Not if he doesn't have an order."

"It's okay," Sedeya mumbled, edging towards the entrance. Tambell suddenly had the impression that the prospect of staying with Aalia scared him even more than what might happen if he went with them.

"But don't you want to wait and see if you win your bet?" she prompted.

The kid scurried past him out the box and stopped by Rizz, near the stairs. "Uh, not really," he said. "I wasn't feeling very lucky when I made it."

Tambell paused at the statement. Did it mean Reye had already decided not to play his part in Aalia's scheme? If so, he might be persuaded to tell them what he knew about it. He turned back to Aalia. "I'll be back for you later," he promised softly. "After you've won *your* bet."

Her eyes narrowed, and the smile slanted into something suspiciously close to a sneer. "You just do that."

"Actually, I don't think we'll need to come back," Rizz interrupted, handing back Tambell's comlink as he stepped to his side. "I think we can take her in right now."

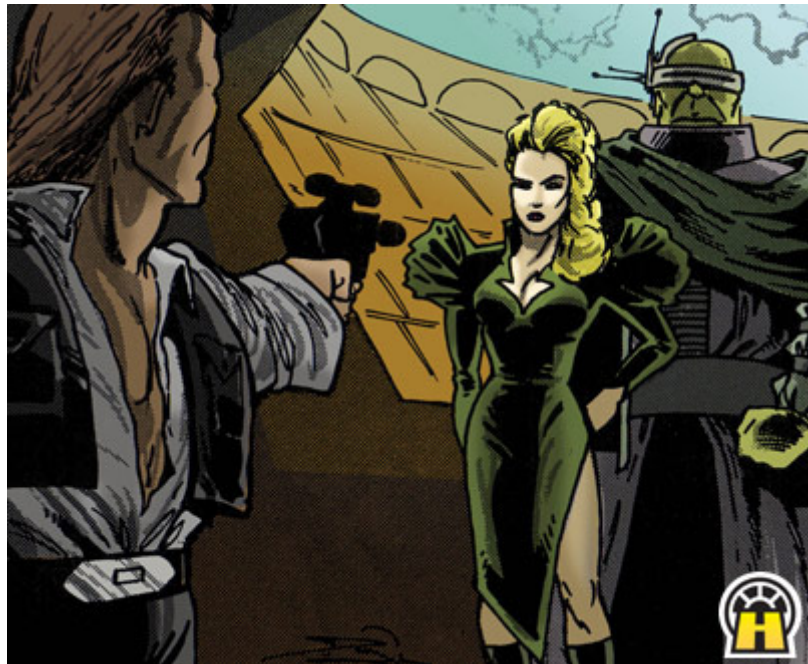
Tambell looked at him, raised an eyebrow.

"That was Franni," Rizz said. "Seems there's been a number of deposits posted to the accounts of several jocks in today's race -- except for a notable few."

"Like the ones on Aalia's exacta ticket?" Tambell suggested.

"A coincidence, I'm sure," Rizz agreed. "Some of the funds come from a restaurant down south, some from a cantina in Stassia City, and some from a couple of other seemingly unrelated businesses. But they all do have one thing in common." He glanced at the crime madame. "It gets a little convoluted, but the upshot is that Aalia Duulang has a financial interest in all of them."

Aalia was no longer smiling.



"That doesn't mean anything," she said disdainfully, tossing blond hair back over one shoulder. "I have several business interests. I can't keep track of every credit they pay out, or who they pay them to. You're grabbing at drive trails if you think you can prove a connection."

The growing roar of the crowd nearly drowned her out. Caught up in the business at hand, Tambell hadn't realized the race was in its final laps, but suddenly the whole grandstand seemed to seethe as fans screamed their favorites to the finish. A small stampede headed down the stairs towards the laser-link fence, and Tambell glanced over to see Sedeya slipping stealthily up the steps.

The kid's face was wary but determined, and Tambell had taken a step after him when a whisper of movement to his left had him whipping the blaster off his belt instead. He pointed it at one of Aalia's watchdogs, who was pointing one right back.

The man froze when he saw that Sedeya's defection hadn't proven enough of a diversion. Rizz kept the other watchdog covered as the results of the race were announced. Aalia's mouth tightened as a smile spread over Tambell's face. "Congratulations," he said. "You've just won a one-way ticket to Kessel."

Her eyes were glacial. "You'll never make the charges stick," she said coldly as they disarmed the two associates. "Your *real* suspect's gotten away, but don't think you'll be able to pin this on me."

"He isn't going far," Tambell said. "He can't shake the surveil-cam."

"Oh? He already has," she said, looking pointedly over his shoulder.

Tambell half-turned, and saw the device hovering several tiers down, turning this way and that as if searching the crowd in confusion. He frowned, then shrugged nonchalantly for Aalia's benefit. "No problem. We'll just pick him up later."

Maybe by then he'd have thought up some excuse to explain the kid's involvement in all this. Something that didn't mention Jedi, or any weird Force. Not that he believed in such superstition, of course. But there was no sense even mentioning it to his superiors. It would only get him in trouble.

And meanwhile, there was Aalia.

After four long years, they finally had her. He smiled in satisfaction, pulled a set of binders off his belt, and handed them to Rizz.

"Is that really necessary?" Aalia asked haughtily.

"No," Rizz told her, snapping them around her wrists anyway. Spectators stared at them curiously as they filed past up the stairs, and Tambell searched the grandstand again for a glimpse of Reye.

Oh well, he thought. The kid was too dumb to elude them for long. Then again, he had seemed too dumb to elude them at all...

Tambell shrugged. He'd worry about it later. Ignoring Aalia's vicious green glare, he thumbed on his comlink, called dispatch, and requested a prisoner pickup.